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ABSTRACT

School climate is defined as the norms, beliefs, and attitudes reflected in institutional patterns and practices that enhance or impede student achievement. Research findings support the notion that school learning climate is an important factor in determining academic outcomes. School climate is largely dependent on the leadership of the principal. The productivity and satisfaction of students is promoted by a healthy school climate. The basic needs of students should be addressed in the development of a good working climate. They include, physiological needs, safety, acceptance, recognition, and self-actualization. School climate determinants can be divided into the three major areas of program, process, and materials. How these determinants are developed and implemented make up the key area of focus in determining what actually exists within a school. Basic steps for administrators in their efforts to develop a better school climate include review what is taking place, make changes where necessary, assess communications and receive feedback, examine motivation techniques, examine how problems are identified, examine how goals are set, compare climates, involve staff in decision making, look at climate factors, and examine the organizational structure of the school. (JEH)

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The "Basics" Relative to School Climate

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Lawrence W. Lezotte, in his book, School Learning Climate and Student Achievement, defines climate as the norms, beliefs and attitudes reflected in institutional patterns and behavioral practices that enhance or impede student achievement. This definition encompasses every aspect of the educational environment which attributes to the learning climate. Such areas include the school principal as a leader, teacher commitment to teaching, maintenance of high expectations, maintaining a healthy environment, time on task and time for teaching and parent involvement. All of these areas are highly significant parts of a learning climate and their effectiveness will be reflected within the particular school.

According to Lezotte's findings, the single most important study of schools and the factors relating to achievement was the Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (Coleman et al., 1966) of our nation's schools. This study used achievement outcomes as a measure of school quality rather than the inputs more commonly associated with quality. The Coleman Report clearly showed that such inputs as school facilities, teacher salaries, number of books in the library, and quality of science labs had very little relation to achievement outcomes. This study indicated that the differences in individual student achievement within schools were far greater than the differences in achievement between schools.

Another important study was done by Brookover et al. (1979) who studied 91 randomly selected elementary schools in Michigan. They were interested in the relationship between school inputs, structure, and climate to mean

(average) school achievement, mean self-concept, and mean student self-reliance. Achievement was measured by the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, which uses content-specific, criterion-referenced tests. In fact, all four of the methodological issues with which we have been concerned are addressed in this analysis. Brookover et al. (1979) found that school learning climate explained school achievement as well as the racial or socioeconomic level of the student population. Furthermore, the school learning climate and social structure explained approximately 80% of the variance in achievement between black schools and white (both high and low SES) schools. This research demonstrated that the school learning climate, reflecting the expectations for success, evaluations of students' ability to learn, the students' perception of teachers' expectations and evaluation, and the resulting student feelings of futility, clearly varied from school to school and accounted for wide differences in achievement above individual student characteristics. Further, this study supports the contention that it is what occurs <u>within</u> the school social system that influences school performance, not the assumed innate abilities of the students.

When the school learning climate is viewed as:

- the dynamic patterns of classroom interactions and teaching processes (with the classroom as a unit of analysis);
- organizational structures based on differences in philosophy and practices (tracking);
- differences in the school setting due to time spent on lessons, attendance rates, and perceptions of levels of discipline;
- the overall atmosphere or ethos of a building;

- the intellectual and academic emphasis and norms in a building.
- the normative patterns of teacher and student expectations, evaluations, beliefs and group practices,

it correlates positively with achievement. A positive school climate enhances the achievement of educational goals which include academic learning and curriculum improvement.

Dr. Robert S. Fox, Director of ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies and Social Sciences Education states that, "any school climate improvement project must begin with the examination and internalization of the component characteristics of the existing climate." It is important to start from what actually exists in the school and to keep an open mind about change. Sometimes it is easier for an administrator to view their climate as what he or she would like to see instead of what actually is.

Fox also indicates that there are basic goals of a good school climate. These goals include:

1. Productivity and satisfaction which are basically achieving the "basic skills" and developing constructive attitudes and an adequate knowledge base. Both of these areas are inseparable. If an individual is satisfied he or she will be more productive and the more productive one is, the more satisfied.

2. The principal as a key figure in providing the leadership for school climate. This goal is important for it reinforces the importance of the leadership qualities of a building principal and the impact these qualities have on the development of a good school climate. The principal is still the key figure in instructional leadership and change.

A good working climate can be sensed. A person can literally feel the aura of a room, along with the aura of a school. Climate is felt more than heard, or even seen. A healthy school climate will promote productivity and a relaxed working atmosphere.

The area of basic needs should be addressed when developing a good working climate. These basic needs, according to Abraham Maslow, include from the lowest priority to the highest:

Physiological - are the personal needs of each individual being met?

Safety - are the basic safety needs being met, i.e., student discipline?; a high student discipline problem will raise the anxiety level of staff.

Acceptance and Friendships - is there good relationships among peer groups with students and staff, including support staff?

Recognition of Achievement - is there an adequate reward system built in, i.e., renumeration of credits, release time, raises, etc.?

Self-Actualization - are staff willing to grow personally, as well as professionally?

One level must be met before going on to the next. These basic needs cannot be pushed to the side when analyzing climate. In conjunction with the basic needs, there are eight climate factors described by Robert Fox which comprise the school's climate and quality. These factors include:

Respect - is there trust between staff and administrators and staff and students?

Trust - is there trust between staff and administrators?

High Morale - is there an optimism within the building?

Opportunities for Input - are there avenues for staff and students to provide input on issues?

Continuous Academic and Social Growth - is personal and professional growth promoted by the administration?

Cohesiveness - is the staff unified and is there open communication?

School Renewal - are new ideas enhanced and supported?

Caring - is there a feeling of concern for other people throughout the building?

Fox then divides the school climate determinants into three major areas. These areas include:

1. Program = Active Learning
   Individualized Performance Objectives
   Varied Learning Environments
   Flexible Curriculum and Extracurricular Activities
   Support and Structure Appropriate to Learner's Maturity
   Rules Cooperatively Determined
   Varied Reward Systems

2. Process = Problem Solving
   Improvement of School Goals
   Working With Conflicts
   Effective Communications
   Decision Making
   Autonomy With Accountability
   Effective Teaching-Learning Strategies
   Ability to Plan for the Future

3. Material = Adequate Resources
   Supportive and Effective Logistical System
   Suitability of School Plant

There are seven areas which focus on the climate determinates. These areas include the following key questions which need to be addressed when analyzing what actually exists within a school.

How are rules determined?

Is there a flexible curriculum?

Are there varied learning environments?

Are there reward systems?

Is growth recognized? Growth should include administrators as well.

Are growth opportunities offered?

Is there support?

It is vital that the building principal be recognized as the climate leader and is considered to be the key figure in climate development, as perceived by parents, staff and students.

The basic steps in developing a better school climate for the administration are listed as follows:

1. Start with the existing climate. Review and analyze what is actually taking place within the school.
2. Be willing to accept responsibility and make changes where necessary, i.e., in staff and in one's self.
3. Assess the communications avenue and be willing to receive feedback.
4. Examine motivation techniques.
5. Examine how problems are identified.
6. Examine how goals are set.
7. Compare climates.
8. Involve staff indecision making.
9. Look at climate factors.
10. Examine the organizational structure of the school.

These steps are basic, however, it solely rests upon the leadership quality of the building principal to enhance the quality of a school's climate. The principal is still a key agent for change and it is the principal's leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers and degree of concern for what students may or may not become. The principal is the main link between the school and community and the method this is accomplished determines the attitudes of students and parents. If the school is vibrant, innovative, child-centered and has a reputation for excellence in teaching, the principal's leadership is the key to its success.

The area of change will come in further enhancement of leadership skill for building principals, in order to deal with climate growth within their respective organizational structures. This is a definite direction in bringing about change in climate.

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